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Henderson, Deborah (2006) The New Cultural Geography for Pre-service Teachers: Floating lives - A Critical Approach to Rural-Urban Migration in China. In Purnell, Kevin and Lidstone, John and Hodgson, Stephanie, Eds. *Proceedings International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education Symposium - Changes in Geographical Education: Past, Present and Future*, **pages pp. 201-205, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.**

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The New Cultural Geography for pre-service teachers: Floating lives - a critical approach to rural-urban migration in China.

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Abstract:
This paper explores the significance of the recent movement of up to 100 million migrants from rural provinces to the industrial zones and large cities in China. A considerable proportion of these migrants are women who have moved away from their place of residence without the required transfer of official residence. First, this paper locates the 'floating lives' (Dutton 1998) of this demographic shift in a global, economic, historical, political and cultural context, and in doing so, explores the significance of gender in framing a new cultural geography in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). Second, this paper advocates that a critical inquiry approach to the study of such social and economic changes in China provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop a broader understanding of the forces shaping the region and to develop their capacity to become Asia-literate teachers. Establishing and sustaining teachers' commitment to fostering cross-cultural understanding in the studies of Asia is vital if future generations of Australians are to be skilled in the knowledge and understanding required to interact with the peoples of the region.

Keywords: Globalisation, gender, rural-urban migration, cross-cultural understanding, critical inquiry, Asia-literacy.

China is experiencing such vast and rapid change that it could be argued it has become the crucible of the global economy. As Jacka and Gaetano (2004, p. 1) observe, these changes are "comparable to the industrial revolution that occurred in Europe, but squeezed into decades rather than spread over centuries". Moreover, if such development is sustainable, few nations will benefit more than Australia for the improvement in Australia's terms of trade and living standards are partly linked to China's need to import the raw materials which feed its economy. Moreover, it is estimated that by 2010, China will be Australia's largest trading partner (Stevens, 2005).

As the forests of China have long been denuded and it does not have enough trees to make timber for construction, the Chinese build in concrete and steel. The economic impact of this is significant. For example, almost 30 per cent of China's steel demand is from residential construction. China uses 40 per cent of the world's concrete, 35 per cent of global steel output, 20 per cent of all copper and 11 per cent of nickel (Stevens 2005, p. 38). Moreover, what China exports it sells more cheaply than its competitors and this is one reason why its global growth is so strong. For example, during 2005, China's GDP grew at 9 per cent. Some analysts suggest the nation can sustain annual growth rates of 7 per cent for at least two decades, fuelling the notion of an economic "super cycle" (Stevens 2005, p. 38) which assumes that China's urbanisation will create a decades-long increase in demand for raw materials as billions of Chinese aspire to a Western standard of living.

In social terms, these changes are manifest in the massive migration, assumed to be more than 100 million (Mallee 2000, p. 35), from the poorly resourced, largely rural interior provinces to the industrialized urban areas in China's coastal provinces and Special Economic Zones. This demographic shift provides the foot soldiers for China's manufacturing economy and helped to create it as an exporting superpower. However, the workers driving China's domestic and global development earn low wages in poor conditions "in occupations that urbanites shun" (Jacka & Gaetano 2004, p. 2). A considerable proportion of these migrants are women who have moved away from their place of residence without the required transfer of official residence *(hukou)*. These migrant women are known by different terms – 'working sisters', 'outsider sisters', 'blind drifters' and 'floating population' (Jacka, 1998).

Given this brief overview, it might be assumed that such poorly paid workers fit a stereotyped notion of disadvantage. In terms of gender relations, it has been assumed that Chinese migrant women have to follow their husbands in the role of family caregiver or migrate for marriage. Another view is that migrant women inadvertently become victims or objects of consumption in the street life of large cities (Dutton, 1998). Although there is evidence that women are exploited, popular assumptions about women do not always reflect the myriad of experiences migrant women encounter. Moreover, these are reinforced by the fact that deep underlying cultural beliefs about gender roles remain powerful in China, despite the social and economics shifts of the past fifty years. Such gendered discourses, voiced most frequently in the countryside, influence the pace of change for women. One belief is that women are inferior to men. A related belief stems from the traditional Confucian notions of filial piety and centres on the preference for male over female offspring, and the associated filial duties of males in the Chinese family (Mackerras *et al.,* 1993). Today in China, sons carry the family name, inherit family assets, take care of their aging parents and perform filial funeral rites (Henderson 2005). Given China's regional and ethnic differences, it is difficult to gain an accurate insight into the ways in which these beliefs impact upon Chinese women. However, recent scholarship indicates that the gendered nature of women's migration in contemporary China is far more complex (Lee, 1998; Davin, 1999; Chan, 2002; Gaetano, & Jacka, 2004) than stereotypical assumptions infer. Before these critiques are explored in more detail, it is necessary to set the historical and political features of rural-urban migration in context.

The assumption that the "economic and political process of development and change" (Hargreaves 1994, p. 34) which characterise modernization involved a process of rural to urban migration is evident in the grand narratives of Western tradition. Raymond Williams (1973) argues that this assumption can be traced back to classical Greek culture. This view also assumed a divide between traditional agricultural society and modern urban society. Yet Cohen (1993, pp. 154-7) argues that this view was not part of traditional Chinese notions of progress. Rather, the concept of a rural-urban divide emerged in China during the late nineteenth century when the Chinese were attempting to deal with the impact of Western imperialism.

The reaction of the Chinese to the challenge posed by Western powers was essentially twofold. On the one hand, a powerful faction wanted to renew Chinese tradition and resist change. On the other, some intellectuals considered that it was only by adopting Western modernization that China would survive. The latter view, driven by intellectuals such as Feng Guifen (1809-74), grew into the 'self strengthening movement' which assumed that the Chinese should "take the foreigners as their teachers and models" then "move ahead and surpass them" (Feng Guifen in de Barry, 1964, p. 47). This view was palpable in new discourses about the countryside and its peasants as Chinese intellectuals began to assume that the peasants were backward and needed to modernize. For example, Jacka and Gaetano (2004, p. 14) argue that during the first half of the twentieth century "peasants and women became popular subjects for literature in which they were often portrayed as prime examples of the backwardness and oppression of traditional society, serving as a metaphor for the nation's ills".

Mao's victory in 1949 suggested that the peasants would assume a superior status, for Mao valorised them as the most revolutionary class in China (Mackerras *et al.,* 1993). Yet from the 1950s, the Communist Party developed a series of policies that would have far reaching ramifications for the rural-urban divide as all citizens were registered as either agricultural or non-agricultural residents. Household registration (*hukou*) was inherited from the mother and it was difficult for an individual to transfer registration from agricultural to non-agricultural. Moreover, during the Great Leap Forward Mao redirected resources from agriculture to support his program of industrialization. Such central planning enhanced the urban-rural divide and the household registration system restricted internal migration, for it was almost

impossible to find housing or purchase food, without a local, non-agricultural household registration card.

In political terms, it might be argued that the basis for China's unprecedented growth and its subsequent impact on demographic shifts can be traced to Deng Xiaoping's (1904-97) efforts to make China more open to the rest of the world, following years of Maoist isolation. After Deng assumed the leadership in 1978, his reforms, generally referred to as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics,' meant that the Chinese economy underwent significant change. Such internal reforms resulted in a 240 per cent increase in China's share of Asia's industrial and commercial output over twenty years (Henderson, 2005, p. 260). Although the state maintained its control over rural-urban migration, it was easier in the new market economy for those without a local, non-agricultural household registration card to find employment. Moreover, the continued growth of the market economy stimulated and depended on, this mobile labour force, including the flow of labour out of agriculture and into industry and services.

However, as few rural-urban migrants are able to transfer their *hukou*, lack of urban registration makes it difficult to attain a better standard of living. Obstacles such as working in restricted occupations, lack of access to work-related entitlements such as housing and medical care, impact on the quality of life that can be aspired to. In terms of social mobility, rural–urban migrants without registration cannot buy or build property or participate in work-based social and political activities. Moreover, as Jacka (1998) observes, prejudice against the floating population is strong amongst urban citizens who often characterise migrants as vast unkempt hordes of ignorant outsiders. Despite such hardships, the factors prompting rural-urban migration continue. These factors include the increasing disparity between rural and urban areas, the lack of local opportunities for non-agricultural employment in poor rural areas, and the shortage of agricultural land. Such dynamics together with the demand for cheap, unskilled labour in manufacturing and service industries in large cities, continue to drive mass migration in China (Henderson 2005).

It is estimated that women make approximately one-third of rural migrants in China. However, in the globally-oriented export-focused Special Economic Zones of Southern China, women make up to 70 per cent of the migrant workforce (Jacka & Gaetano 2004). Here they are the backbone of the workforce in the textile industry and manufacturing industries. Similarly, women dominate domestic service, waitressing and other service industries. Although there is evidence of the vulnerability of young migrant women to exploitation, recent translations of women's stories (Gaetano & Jacka 2004) challenge gendered assumptions and indicate that many migrant women resist abuse and exploitation, and view their efforts to seek a better standard of living as a rite of passage. Some work away from home for short periods, others are absent for several years. Upon returning such women often have enhanced status due to the improvement in their economic position. Despite the hardships, other women permanently relocate and illegally inhabit the outskirts of cities. Smart (1999) suggests that rural women who migrate often welcome the wider range of experiences they encounter away from the patriarchal authority of their families. Other women actively seek the experience and challenge migration brings (Roberts 2000). Many make informed and independent decisions about marriage, issues of reproduction and sexuality. Married women often take on new responsibilities resulting in the shifting of power balance in martial relationships as both partners adjust to the challenges of urban working lives (Jacka & Gaetano 2004). These new interpretations of highly mobile lives caught up in the economic implications of globalisation indicate the richness of experiences that a new cultural geography can draw upon.

Given China's economic metamorphosis in response to global forces and its significance for Australia's future, it is necessary to consider the impact of globalisation from a theoretical perspective. At one level, globalisation describes the complex ways in which the lives of the

world's people have become increasingly linked and new ways in which local and national communities relate to each other (Tikly 2001). At another level, Scholte (2000) and Held *et al.* (1999), refer to globalisation's capacity to deliver progress and prosperity to some whilst others experience deprivation and disengagement. Robertson (1992, p.8) observes that globalisation involves both "the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole". Such is the nature of this phenomenon that Isin and Wood (1999) contend globalisation is a feature of contemporary perception as well as reality.

Current debate indicates a lack of consensus on the implications of globalisation for education policy (Rizvi, 2004, p. 157). Yet despite the complexities of globalisation and debates about education policy directions, key stakeholders in Australia agree that education has to prepare students to deal with its manifestations. Through the Australian Education Council (AEC), ministers for education from federal, state and territory governments have sought to define the common aspirations of their various systems, aiming at a consensus on the role of schooling in dealing with the challenges of globalisation. The AEC's Adelaide Declaration of National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCEETYA, 1999, p. 2) states that schooling should "assist young people to contribute to Australia's social, cultural and economic development in local and global context".

Global education focuses on the 'double-edged sword' or the 'mixed blessings' of globalisation. In this way it has much to contribute to the pedagogical ramifications of the new cultural geography as it foregrounds human culture and society together with the environments in which people live. Its advocacy of critical thinking together with "an emphasis on the future, the dynamic nature of human society, and each person's capacity to choose and shape preferred futures" (Curriculum Corporation 2005, p. 3) presents powerful intellectual tools for the cultural geographer. The emphasis on critical thinking also provides the means for questioning the assumptions of traditionally ascendant Eurocentric world views which marginalised 'other' cultures. It can be argued that Enlightenment notions of civilization suppressed or silenced the cultures of non-Western peoples. As Edward Said observed in *Orientalism* (1978), European scholarship frequently constructed Asia as a representation of what it desired from the 'East'. This invented 'Orient', and the knowledge built upon this representation of it, was accepted by many Australians as accurate 'knowledge' about Asia.

The significance of Asia for Australia's future has been noted by the peak body representing Australian scholars of Asia, the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Its 2002 report indicates that the forces of globalisation will lead Australia to interact increasingly with the countries of Asia (ASAA 2002). Asia-literacy, the capacity to reflect upon and explore cultural difference in the Asian region in a meaningful way, is essential for dealing with the challenges of negotiating cultural differences in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. And it is crucial that teachers do not perpetuate outmoded cultural assumptions. As future leaders in the profession, pre-service teachers must be equipped with the knowledge, understanding and pedagogical skills necessary to foster cross-cultural understanding and Asia-literacy (Henderson 2004). Establishing and sustaining pre-service teachers' commitment to fostering cross-cultural understanding in the studies of Asia is essential if future generations of Australians are skilled in the knowledge and understanding required to interact with the peoples of the region.

A new cultural geography which explores the ways in which globalisation and market forces impact upon the social and cultural landscape in China provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop a broader understanding of the forces that continue to shape one of Australia's most significant neighbours in the region. This paper argues that a critical investigation of such phenomena will enhance pre-service teachers' capacity to foster cross-cultural understanding and develop their capacity to become Asia-literate teachers.

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